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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 000050

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TAGS: [MOPS](#) [ASEC](#) [PREL](#) [ER](#) [ET](#)

SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA DENIES INVOLVEMENT IN SKIRMISH ON ERITREA
BORDER

REF: A. ASMARA 3

[1](#)B. 09 ADDIS ABABA 3068

Classified By: CDA Tulinabo Mushingi for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Responding to recent Eritrean claims of border attacks initiated by the Ethiopian military, the Government of Ethiopia (GoE) initially publicly denied the attacks had occurred and later acknowledged to us the attacks had probably occurred while strongly denying GOE involvement. GoE officials privately suggest claims of responsibility by Eritrean rebel groups are accurate and disingenuously explain that Ethiopia cannot monitor the activities of such groups, even those operating out of Ethiopia. End summary.

GoE Publicly Denies Knowledge of Recent Skirmish...

[1](#)2. (U) On January 3, the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement claiming that Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) forces had launched successive attacks on Eritrea near the disputed border town of Zalambesa on January 1. (Note: In this context, "TPLF" most likely refers to Ethiopian National Defense Forces, the Ethiopian military. End note.) According to the statement, the Eritrean military drove the soldiers back into Ethiopia, killing ten and capturing two (Ref A). In statements issued January 3 and 4, Ethiopian Government Communications Minister Bereket Simon and spokesman Shimelis Kemal said there had been no attack and accused Eritrea of attempting to deflect attention from internal Eritrean difficulties.

[1](#)3. (U) On January 8, Minister Bereket revised his statement, saying, "there might have been a fight with insurgents, but Ethiopia wasn't involved in any way." In the same statement, he equated Eritrean claims of Ethiopian involvement in the attacks with claims by Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki that the CIA was behind the attacks, as well as the recently imposed UNSC sanctions against Eritrea, stating: "Eritrea thinks blaming U.S. intelligence for anything that happens will help it escape from its internal troubles... They always blame IGAD, CIA, or regional governments."

...But Privately Says Eritrean Rebels Are Responsible

[1](#)4. (C) Privately, the GoE has been more candid about the

likely source of the attacks. On January 8, Tesfaye Yilma, Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Director General for Europe and the Americas, suggested to A/DCM that the two Eritrean opposition groups that claimed responsibility for attacking Eritrean military installations and killing 25 Eritrean troops, the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization (RSADO) and the Eritrean National Salvation Front (ENSF), had probably done so. Tesfaye insisted that there was "no link at all" between the attacks and the GoE. Asked whether the GoE had a reaction to foreign rebel groups attacking a neighboring state from within Ethiopian territory, Tesfaye said it was difficult to identify the groups because their membership spanned the border.

15. (C) On January 11, MFA Americas Director Tebeje Berhe Shook called A/DCM and directed him to an Eritrean diaspora website (www.awate.com) featuring an interview with Jabir Ahmed, military commander of the ENSF, indicating some degree of GoE concurrence with the claims represented by Ahmed. In the interview, Jabir claimed the January 1 operation was intended to demonstrate coordination among Eritrean opposition groups and the ability of such groups to conduct joint operations, as well as to force the Eritrean government to acknowledge the existence of such groups. Ahmed claimed the timing of the attacks had nothing to do with the recently imposed UNSC sanctions.

16. (C) In a January 8 meeting with A/DCM, opposition Oromo People's Congress (OPC) and Forum leader Merera Gudina offered two possible explanations for the incident: 1) The GoE ordered Ethiopian National Defense Forces to attack

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Eritrea to test the international community's reaction in light of recent sanctions; or 2) Eritrean opposition groups operating out of Ethiopia and funded by the GoE carried out the attacks with GoE approval.

Comment

17. (C) Several Embassy sources have suggested that the attacks likely did occur, originated in Ethiopia, and were carried out by GoE-supported Eritrean rebels. This explanation is plausible, given the GoE's initial refusal to admit knowledge of the attacks, subsequent private comments, and Eritrea's preference to blame Ethiopia for its woes rather than admit an internal challenge. It is unclear whether the timing of the attacks was coordinated with the GoE at all, and if so, whether it was influenced by the upper hand the GoE feels it has in light of recent UNSC sanctions. End comment.
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